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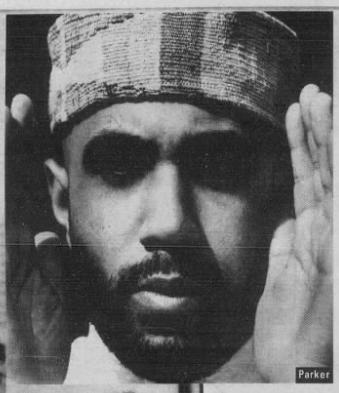
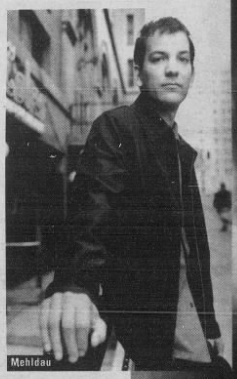
Don't Wake Me

A dream week of jazz in L.A.

BY GREG BURK


Parker


Mehldau

Berne

Live jazz had a week to remember last month. One artist took a big career risk. Another made a long-awaited return. Another held a triumphal homecoming. And I didn't have to go to New York or San Francisco or Dubuque to see any of it.

I knew Leon Parker was going to make me look like an idiot when I saw the drums and cymbals spread around the Jazz Bakery's stage. Having inferred from "vocal body percussion" in Parker's press release that his Sunday solo one-night stand would consist exclusively of the *instrumentless* self-pummeling I'd seen him do on an earlier occasion, I'd previewed his show in the *Weekly* accordingly. On top of that, I'd suggested that the solo trip was just a toe-in-the-water prelude to a follow-up visit from his quartet or quintet — I'd learned too late that he'd resolved to devote at least the next year or two to a lone-soldier mission. I sneaked in guiltily and ducked into a rear chair.

The stealth was pointless; nobody was looking at me. You won't often see an audience, even one as small as this (under 40 attendees), rivet so breathlessly to a single performer. In addition to anchoring Jacky Terrasson's piano trio, Parker has become known through his own recordings as a revolutionary avatar of small-group minimalism; his compositional, melodic and rhythmic gifts made every note an event. By himself, though, he's less minimal. Even when he's just exploring the resonances of his chest, thighs and shiny genie head with his bare hands, he builds up ever-mutating layers of complexity. He might also beat out a ritual rhythm on conga while counterpointing himself with vocal *ghang-ghang* sounds, or develop a cooking groove on East African *dumbak* that leaves your leg jerking long after he's stopped, or lead a tribal audience call-and-response that gets you effortlessly executing untranscribable time signatures, or just work out for 10 minutes on the unlikely sounds he can get by bending and manipulating a single cymbal.

When it was announced at the end that Parker would come back out to answer questions, nobody left. Standing there in his baggy athletic togs from The Gap ("I like the uniformity of chain stores"), he told us he grew up in a racially blended New York neighborhood, feeling no pressure to do anything in particular: "My parents left me alone." He said he treated every artistic experience "as if it were the end of the world." He said he considered the visual element in his solo music important enough that he was looking to make his next release a video. And he admitted that the constant self-slapping wears out his clothes quickly. "I'm hard on things," he said. "And hard on people. Just ask my manager."

Yeah. Put yourself in that guy's shoes. Your artist, who has made three of the best albums of the decade and is well-positioned to found a whole new school of ensemble jazz, says he's decided to go it alone for a few years. You know the music's going to be good. But does that keep your hands off his neck? Apparently.

The first time I saw Tim Berne blow his sax was at a kind of music-journalist insider event in the filthy gloom of the punk rock club Cathay de Grande on Argyle Avenue in Hollywood, 1980. Phast Phreddie of *Back Door Man* magazine had booked the gig. *BDM* colleague D.D. Faye was taking money at the door. Richard Meltzer was spinning Dexter Gordon in the DJ corner. Don Snowden was hulking around. Berne wasn't yet an internationally known avant-gardian; he was just a New Yorker who used to try out new material in L.A. sometimes, a musician our local drum phenom Alex Cline happened to know.

That was the last time he had appeared on a Los Angeles stage, so I was jazzed to hear that Berne would be playing in duo with bassist Michael Formanek at LunaPark's New Music Monday, even though Phred's in Brooklyn, Meltzer's in Portland, and Snowden's in Spain. Jeff Gauthier (a violinist, not a journalist) and Bill Kohlhaase were there, though, so I sat with them. Kirk Silsbee was over to the side. Notes were taken.

The T-shirted duo gnarled first into Formanek's "Jiggle the Handle," the big bassist muscling his viol as easily as a ukulele, plucking tart double-stops, popping out clear harmonic pings, gripping dense downward slides, bending the thick strings, while Berne's gentle alto vibrato wafted an Ornette Coleman–ish dirge. Berne reached up for a sweet lyricism on "Emerger," pulled three or four simultaneous high overtones from his baritone sax on "Stubborn Love" before plunging to fee-fi-fo lows, and smoothed out almost into Gerry Mulligan velvet on "Coincidence." No, it wasn't just a whirl of technique. This duo didn't need drums to swing hard — even when my mind occasionally fried on the music's heartful intensity, my body got the message.

Way more than just a warm-up was the duo of Right of Violet/Unique Cheerful Events guitarist G.E. Stinson and electric-koto player Miya Masaoka, a much-in-demand performer whom I'd heard on the latest recording by that surprising clarinetist Ben Goldberg. Masaoka and Stinson inflated a cushion of sound so thick you could drift away on it: She bowed or yanked the strings of her electronic-interfaced instrument, a surfboard of a thing mounted on a stand, while he either leaned into heavy feedback or twangled out little Japanese-sounding arpeggios just to confuse us. Dark-dreamy.

As opposed to romantic. That's what Brad Mehldau is: the knight who restored sensitivity to its throne, which turned out to be a piano bench.

I didn't think there'd ever be another great interpreter of Golden Age standards, but here he is. He's just released his third trio album, on which he shows a heady modern compositional touch and even makes a swell Chopinian gush out of Radiohead's "Exit Music (For a Film)," but the standards are what stick. If you think such re-examinations are easy, take a lesson from Joshua Redman's current *Timeless Tales*, on which Mehldau, in the little front space he's allowed, wiggles his fingers deep into tunes like "Love for Sale" and (whoa) "The Times They Are A-Changin'," while Redman's sax skips over them like a flat rock and sinks.

But in the glowing elegance of Largo (why don't they book more jazz there?), everything was in balance. Mehldau wouldn't even sit down until a piano technician had spent an hour adjusting the keyboard, which in this pianist's case is fully justified. Curled over so his forehead almost brushed the mahogany, Mehldau sprayed out his thoughts with a classically light right hand while his left hovered like a hummingbird, sometimes for several measures at a time, waiting for the correct moment to alight. His approach has so much in it: Monkish spacing, ripping abandon, gentle abstraction, Bachian fugue, real sweetness, even a touch of calypso. Maybe most impressive technically was a segment where he emoted a strong melody with his left hand while tripping out rapid arpeggios with his right. But the best thing about Mehldau is his genuineness — it just doesn't feel like a show. Not to forget his trio mates: Drummer Jorge Rossy could comb a butterfly's hair, and bassist Larry Grenadier could swing a milk truck.

The gentleman who sat to my left at the bar, a character actor of moderate stature, said Mehldau's efflorescent quality reminded him of Bill Evans, whom he'd seen many years ago in New York. I like Mehldau a lot better — you never feel his hands have taken leave of his brain. And I'm not saying that just because he's from L.A.

Music

PARKER: JOHN SANN; MEHLDAU: TIM HALE; BERNE: CHERYL KLAUSS

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